# PAUL STEPHENS

I was in an expectant mood when I set off to IBM's plush South Bank establishment (next to the National Theatre) for what promised to be a bonanza of PC-related product launches. The first item of note about this event was its timing – exactly the same as Microsoft's MS-DOS 5.0 launch across the river at Olympia. Perhaps it's going a bit far to link this with rumours of an ongoing IBM-Microsoft relationship difficulty, but IBM did change the start time, originally an hour earlier, at the last moment – thus making sure that nobody could run round the corner to a waiting taxi and catch the MS-DOS do as well. IBM staff seem to have a truly unnatural ability to keep a straight face when quizzed about such matters, so I didn't bother.

The choice was therefore between the potentially gruesome spectacle of TV personality Jonathon Ross launching an operating system ('Woss on DOS' was the event's cruel semi-official working title) and the more sober, mind-improving fare on offer at IBM. Having already spent quite a lot of time with the beta-release of MS-DOS 5.0, I chose the latter, dropping Martin Kelly (who hadn't used it, and what's more owns his own Ross-style Armani suit) off at Olympia on the way.

Down at the South Bank, IBM got straight into action with a 386SX-powered Notebook PC (full details in *News Plus*). This little beast seemed to have appeared from nowhere (it was only a few months ago that the bigger laptop was being solemnly described as 'just a development project') and looked suspiciously Sanyo-slim and un-IBM-like in its black casing. However, the straight faces assured me that it was indeed a completely in-house job.

Either way it seemed nice enough, with a screen not quite up to Olivetti standards (or indeed those of the IBM laptop) but nevertheless quite readable and a decent keyboard (still too often the Achilles heel of notebooks). This notebook is a light weight at 5.9lbs, matching its svelte appearance.

In the notebook world, 'light weight' often means 'something taken out', the something in question being the floppy disk drive. Sure enough, this 5.9lbs worth of IBM notebook doesn't include a floppy. They've gone for an interesting compromise though, throwing in a very neat little 3.5-inch plug-in external drive with every machine.

This, in my view, is a good few dozen times better than the 'plug in a serial cable and talk to a desktop PC'

'For IBM to fit a 386 family processor to the AT bus is a significant admission of defeat'.

solution offered by completely drive-less machines (I wouldn't have one at any price). I'd still rather have a built-in drive though, so that I can always put my data in an accessible place when the batteries start running out.

The other point that stands out in the Notebook's specification is its processor speed – a measly 12MHz. These days, IBM has a curious – and inconsistent – view of clock speeds. One minute it's rushing in ahead of the pack with the world's first 50MHz 486-processor upgrade, the next it's launching a 12MHz 386SX notebook, just when everyone else is moving from 16MHz to 20MHz chips in theirs.

The latter is its traditional policy – the original 4.77MHz PC and 6MHz PC/AT were both out-gunned by almost every other product on the market – and just look at the PS/1. In fact, IBM's inexperience in operating at the leading edge was demonstrated by the public rebuke it received from Intel the following week for announcing the 50MHz upgrade board before Intel had officially announced the 50MHz 486 chip that goes in it.

The reasoning behind the notebook's modest whoompo-factor is of course 'market positioning'. IBM is more than capable of producing a 20MHz SX notebook, but it doesn't want you to be able to run OS/2 (or the other one – what was it? – *Windows*) on it, because that's what its larger laptop machine (or even better, one of its desktop PCs) is for.

The notebook is strictly for simple 'personal productivity' applications – that is word processing and using a

spreadsheet to do your expenses. To guide you towards that view, IBM has helpfully reduced the processor speed to the point where trying to run two programs at the same time would indeed be like watching paint dry.

## CAPITULATION

How much longer Big Blue can get away with this type of 'guidance' in the notebook-eat-notebook rough end of the market is open to question. A hint to the answer was also there at the South Bank in the shape of the PS/2 models 35 and 40, desktop machines which combine (20 MHz) 386SX processors with the old-fashioned, low-performance, common-or-garden PC/AT expansion bus architecture.

For IBM to fit a 386 family processor to the AT bus is a significant admission of defeat by the world's biggest computer company. Four years into the PS/2 product range's life, Microchannel (MCA) architecture should have established itself as the dominant standard, and people from IBM's Boca Raton development centre should have been dropping hints about the really incredible new 'Super MCA' technology that was going to be hitting the market around 1994-5.

Instead, those guys were over here showing us brand new machines built around a design that supposedly died in 1987. The reason is simple; too many people have failed to be guided towards MCA. They are stubbornly sticking to the old AT and some of them – horror of horrors – will even consider taking their custom elsewhere (that is, the 200 or so AT-bus hardware vendors) if Big Blue doesn't give them what they want.

To see IBM reacting passively to the market like this must be a gruesome spectacle indeed for true-Bluers, used to years of carrot-and-stick market control. Nevertheless, things could have been worse for them – at least they haven't been reduced to producing anything based on the EISA design, invented by IBM's competitors as a 'free for all' alternative to MCA.

Finally, a plea – please send us your entries for our 1991 Reader Survey, on page 196. We take great pride in the fact that we plan the PC PLUS editorial pages solely for the benefit of our readers, but without your input we won't know what to plan! Also, there's the chance to win one of our astonishing bundle of prizes, and as we've set up a FREEPOST address for the survey, it will only cost you an envelope to enter. Amazing! *(That's enough ads – ed)*. ●